DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 102 463 CG 009 556

AUTHOR Prerost, Frank J.; Brewer, Robert E.
TITLE The Common Elements of Sex and Aggression as Reflected in Humor Preferences.
PUB DATE Aug 74
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (82nd, New Orleans, Louisiana, August 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Aggression; *Behavior Patterns; Behavior Theories; College Students; *Humor; *Motivation; Research Projects; *Sex Differences; Speeches

ABSTRACT

Freudian theory and subsequent research indicates a connection between sexual and aggressive motivation. The present study investigated preferences among nonsexual, sexual, and aggressive humor as a function of induced aggressive mood. One-hundred and twenty male and 120 female university students participated in one of four 2x2 factorial designs that crossed humor types with two reading passages which constituted the aggression arousal, or the nonarousal, conditions. Subjects in arousal conditions rated all humor types as funnier than subjects in neutral conditions, and they rated sexual humor higher than nonsexual. Males and females showed complex significant differences in humor preferences. (Author/PC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Common Elements of Sex and Aggression as Reflected in Humor Preferences[1]

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED102463

Frank J. Prerost and Robert E. Brewer

DePaul University

Freudian theory, and subsequent research, indicates a connection between sexual and aggressive motivation, and the present study investigated preferences among non-sexual, sexual, and aggressive humor as a function of induced aggressive mood. 120 male, and 120 female university students participated in one of four 2x2 factorial designs that crossed humor types with two reading passages. The reading passages constituted the aggression arousal, or the non-arousal conditions. Subjects in arousal conditions rated all humor types as funnier than subjects in neutral conditions, and they rated sexual humor over non-sexual. Males and females showed complex, significant differences in humor preferences.

[1] Paper presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, New Orleans, August-September, 1974.

CG 009 55

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Common Elements of Sex and Aggression as Reflected in Humor Preferences

Frank J. Prerost and Robert E. Brewer
De Paul University

Freud (1960) theorized that aggressively aroused individuals would tend to prefer aggressive humor, consequently satisfying this mood state. In a study of this theorized preference, Prerost and Brewer (1973) demonstrated that individuals in an aggressive mood state do prefer aggressive humor if they do not feel threatened by the aggressive content. Other forms of humor, not generally classified as aggressive, may also be preferred when in an aggressive state if it satisfies or fits the aggressive mood.

Freud (1960) postulated that there exists a strong connection between the aggressive and sexual moods. This connection was explored by Barclay and Haber (1965) who found increased sexual imagery in projective test material after their subjects were aggressively aroused. Further, Barclay (1970) found a strong linkage between the arousal of aggression and the expression of sexual motivation in both males and females, again using projective instruments. In a study of the effects of sexually arousing reading passages, Lamb (1968) found that subjects significantly preferred sexual humor.

If the connection between sexual and aggressive motives does exist, a preference for sexual humor may also be demonstrated among aggressively aroused subjects. The present study investigated preferences among non-sexual, sexual, and aggressive humor of subjects under conditions of induced aggressive mood. Because of the numerous social role overtones and sexual identity inherent in the humor employed in the present study, the data for males and females were analyzed separately.

The hypotheses tested in the present study are as follows: Aggressively aroused males and females (a) will prefer sexual humor over non-sexual humor; (b) will prefer aggressive humor over sexual humor. Non-aroused males and females (c) will prefer non-sexual humor over sexual humor. There is no basis in Freudian theory, or in previous research results, for expecting non-aroused subjects to prefer either sexual or aggressive humor over the other. The dependent variable was humor ratings; mood adjective checklist ratings were used to test the effectiveness of the experimental treatment conditions.

Method

Subjects. 240 subjects (120 male, 120 female) from General Psychology classes at De Paul University participated. Subjects were randomly assigned to conditions.

Procedure. To induce an aggressive mood within the subjects, two reading passages, designed to be insulting and derogatory to males and females respectively, were used. As a control, a neutral, non-arousing reading passage was also used. To determine the effectiveness of the arousal passages, groups of subjects read the passages and then filled out a mood adjective checklist. The hypotheses were tested by using four 2 x 2 factorial designs, crossing humor type and reading passages. All subjects read either the arousal or the non-arousal passage, and all subjects made preference choices between either sexual and non-sexual jokes, or sexual and aggressive jokes.

Materials. Selection of the aggressive and sexual jokes used in the present study was made, by eleven judges, from a pool of 150 jokes. Each joke was rated on 5-point scales on the dimensions of aggressiveness of sexuality. The 12 jokes with the highest aggressiveness ratings, and the 12 jokes with the highest sexuality ratings, were selected. The mood checklist was a modified version of the Nowlis-Green Mood Adjective Checklist. Subjects indicated their feelings by checking, on a 4-point scale, the degree to which each adjective characterized their feelings. All the jokes were rated by subjects on a 7-point scale ranging from "Not at all" (0) to "Extremely" (6). Subjects were in-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

structed to read the jokes and rate each on the dimension of how funny they thought the joke was.

Results

Effectiveness of aggression induction. The reading passage designed to induce aggressive feelings was highly successful. For females, the mean aggression score was 15.20 in the Aggression Arousal condition, while in the Neutral condition the mean aggression score was only 8.65 (mood intensity is considered to be positively correlated with number size). For males, the mean aggression score was 14.20 in the Aggression Arousal condition, while in the Neutral condition the mean aggression score was 9.31. F tests showed that both differences were significant at the .001 level.

General findings. Subjects in the Aggression Arousal conditions rated all three types of humor as being significantly funnier than did subjects in the Neutral conditions. The main effect F-ratios for the Aggression Arousal treatment were significant at the .01 level. Comparisons involving preferences for sexual versus non-sexual humor showed that the main effect of the Aggression Arousal treatment was significant (for males, $t = 3.31$, $p < .01$; for females, $t = 2.57$, $p < .02$). Both males and females preferred sexual humor over non-sexual humor in the Aggression Arousal condition.

Humor preferences: Females. In the Neutral (non-arousal) condition, female subjects showed a preference for non-sexual, over sexual, humor ($t = 2.26$, $p < .05$). This preference is opposite in direction to the preference shown in the Aggression Arousal condition, in which sexual humor was preferred over non-sexual humor (interaction $F = 9.09$, $p < .01$).

In the Aggressive Arousal condition, female subjects showed a preference for sexual humor over aggressive humor ($t = 4.35$, $p < .001$), and in the Neutral condition, aggressive humor was preferred over sexual humor ($t = 3.21$, $p < .01$) (interaction $F = 10.71$, $p < .01$). These findings, taken together, show that the Aggression Arousal condition leads to a preference for sexual humor by females.

Humor preferences: Males. In the Neutral condition, male subjects showed no preferences for any one of the three types of humor in any of the three possible comparison situations.

In the Aggression Arousal condition, male subjects showed no preference for either sexual or aggressive humor when the choice was between those two humor types. However, when the choice ~~was between sexual~~ and non-sexual humor types, male subjects showed a preference for sexual humor ($t = 3.31$, $p < .01$). This finding is consistent with that for female subjects.

Conclusions

The results support the initial hypothesis which predicted a preference for sexual humor over non-sexual humor after aggression arousal. The second hypothesis, predicting preference for aggressive humor over sexual humor after aggression arousal was not supported. In fact, the data showed that both types of humor were rated as more funny after aggression arousal, with only females showing a preference for the sexual humor. Apparently the two humor types (aggressive and sexual) are very closely related, especially for males. This conclusion is supported by the fact that males' ratings showed equivalent increases for both humor types following aggression arousal. The influence of expectancies in social role behavior may have added to the females' preference for sexual humor when aroused. The third hypothesis was also partially confirmed when females preferred non-sexual humor in non-arousal conditions.

The results do strongly indicate that humor is a natural vehicle for expression of an aggressive mood. Consistently under states of aggression, both males and females demonstrated greater humor appreciation. Although both males and females demonstrated this use of humor, female subjects apparently cognitively differentiate the humor types to a greater degree, leading to definite humor preferences under all experimental conditions. Other forms of humor are preferred, by females, to sexual humor when in non-aggressive

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

moods, but, once aroused, sexual humor becomes the preferred choice. Perhaps the females were following the dictates of standard female social roles (passive-submissive), and they unconsciously rejected sexual humor under non-arousal moods. Once aggression is aroused, the females act upon this mood and reject their role-expectant behavior, specifically attending to the sexual humor content. The sexual aspects of the humor must fit the nature of their aggressive mood.

Males confronted with aggressive and sexual humor tend to differentiate them less and merely appreciate both types more when aggression has been aroused in them. Adhering to the typical male role expectancies leads to less differentiation between sexual and aggression expression since the male learns both are socially acceptable for males. But their significant preference for sexual humor over non-sexual humor when in an aggressive mood also demonstrates the close similarity of the two (sex and aggression) arousal states. It appears that male humor preferences are not so finely delineated as female preferences. Male socialization does not make fine distinctions between acceptable aggressive and sexual behavior, as occurs in female socialization.

The two arousal states of sex and aggression may have similar components and internal emotional cues. Sexual and aggressive humor may have similar components of messages relating both to an aggressive mood. Thus, after aggression arousal, certain cues, common also to sexual arousal, may be present, thereby influencing greater attending to sexual humor. It seems highly probable that the two arousal states of sex and aggression are highly similar, and further research dealing with the aggressive aspects of sexual humor and the commonality of mood states is clearly indicated.

References

Barclay, A. M. The effect of female aggressiveness on aggressive and sexual fantasies. Journal of Projective Techniques, 1970, 34, 19-27.

Barclay, A. M. and Haber, R. N. The relation of aggressive to sexual motivation. Journal of Personality, 1965, 33, 462-475.

Freud, S. Wit and its relation to the unconscious. London: Norton, 1960.

Lamb, C. W. Personality correlates of humor enjoyment following motivational arousal. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1968, 9, 237-241.

Prerost, F. J. and Brewer, R. E. Choice of humor after aggression arousal: A search for relief. Proceedings of the Convention of the American Psychological Association, 1973.